

Marines aim to stay above Husaybah's tribal violence

BY ANDREW TILGHMAN
Stars and Stripes

HUSAYBAH, Iraq — Before the U.S. Marines swept through in a house-by-house search last week, gangster-style warfare raged between the local Sunni tribes of this lawless river town on the Syrian border.

Just a few weeks ago, a cadre of young men from the prominent Salamani tribe kidnapped 24 men from the rival Abu Mahals tribe, slashing their throats in a campaign of intimidation that forced many other Abu Mahals to leave.

"Even me. They took me, and they beat me," said 64-year-old Jadan Khalaf Abedallah, a local sheik and tribal elder of the Abu Mahals. "They beat me until I lost my mind."

Now, as the U.S. Marines are patrolling the city day and night, many Abu Mahals have returned — and they are seeking revenge.

"It's the Hatfields and McCoys over here; these guys have been going at it for years."

Capt. Richard Pitchford
Has overseen Husaybah since the U.S. Marines took over

As the U.S. troops try to stabilize the battle-scarred city before next month's national elections, the insurgents and foreign fighters who attacked U.S. forces from here for nearly a year are only part of the problem.

"It's the Hatfields and McCoys over here; these guys have been going at it for years," said Capt. Richard Pitchford, who has overseen the city since the Marines

took control last week. "Our priority is to provide security, and a big part of that is not only keeping insurgents out, but also keeping the tribes from fighting each other."

The Marines are installing a long-term presence in the city, which has roughly 40,000 residents. They pushed through last week in a seven-day battle that saw scattered resistance and destroyed some of the city's largest buildings.

Until last week, U.S. troops have not patrolled Husaybah for more than a year. Insurgents operated openly, using the city as a key link on a smuggling route that brought weapons and suicide bombers from Syria into Iraq, Marines said.

While nobody has attacked U.S. troops since the fighting ended last week, residents are complaining that tribal violence is on the rise as some Abu Mahals have begun to threaten the Salamani. U.S. forces are making every effort to stay above the fray.

"The last thing we want to be seen as is taking sides," said Maj. Ed Rueda, a civil affairs officer with the U.S. Marines.

The recent war between insurgents on a tangled web of tribal politics, and many here struggle to distinguish between the two. The insurgents who controlled the city for the past year fought of tribal politics, and many here struggle to distinguish between the two. The insurgents who controlled the city for the past year fought of tribal politics, and many here struggle to distinguish between the two.

The U.S. forces, on the other hand, recently began training and equipping an Abu Mahal militia, known as the Khatab al Ahmaseh Brigade. This tribal force of about 100 men fought with the Marines and the Iraqi army units that pushed through the city last week.

The militia, dubbed the "Desert Protectors," also may help police the border with Syria in the coming months, the Marines said.

The links between the Marines and the Desert Protectors make some residents feel the U.S. forces are taking sides and have inflamed tribal tensions.

"They (the Abu Mahal militia) feel like they have the power to hurt people because they came in with the Marines and the Iraqi army," said one Salamani leader, Sheik Mahmoud Al Dari.

At the same time, the Salamani

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Civil affairs officer with the U.S. Marines

use the insurgents to deflect blame for the attacks on Abu Mahals in recent weeks.

"That was some people from Qaida (al-Qaida in Iraq) and some Salamani people that are outside my control, so I am not responsible," Al Dari said, when asked about the killing of Abu Mahals.

The line between Salamani thugs and al-Qaida in Iraq operatives is a blurred one that makes gathering intelligence difficult for the Marines.

"We have some guys who are walking a fine line," Pitchford said. "It's hard to tell who is an al-Qaida guy and who is just a rival tribal guy."

Some residents are optimistic that the tribal tensions will ease with time.

"I'm sure the wise men from both tribes will sit down and solve the problem," said Hamdis El Aloosi, a doctor and member of another tribe based in his hometown about 20 miles east of here.

An informal meeting between Marines and local residents drew



ANDREW TILGHMAN/Stars and Stripes

Tribal leaders Jadan Khalaf Abedallah from the Abu Mahal tribe and Mahmoud Al Dari from the Salamani tribe appear cordial at a recent meeting with U.S. Marines, but their clans are locked in a bitter feud that predates the Marines' arrival.

members of both tribes. A larger meeting set for Sunday will be the first real test of whether tribal leaders are ready to work equally with U.S. forces.

The Americans' stated plan to treat all tribes equally may seem unfamiliar to the tribes here, who are more accustomed to pure power politics and the rules of

might-makes-right.

"It's a long-term approach to the problem, rather than just picking one guy over another," Rueda said. "The power politics are there — we have the power over them and we're going to try to get them to do it our way."

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Home sweet home



Capt. Andrew Park, 502nd Engineer Company commander, salutes along with his fellow soldiers during a welcome home ceremony for the company on Hanau's Pioneer Kaserne on Thursday. The company had deployed to Iraq on Sept. 13, 2004.

KARL WEISSEL
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